

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NEGOTIATION RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES: FROM CEASEFIRE TO PEACE

By: Dr. Marzia Marastoni
February 17, 2026

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On 14 February, on the margins of the Munich Security Conference, the Negotiation Council Geneva, together with the Schraner Negotiation Institute, hosted the high-level side event “Negotiation Risks and Opportunities: From Ceasefire to Peace”, dedicated to one of the most urgent diplomatic challenges of the present moment. In the aftermath of the October 2025 ceasefire in Gaza, the discussion centered on a fundamental question: how can a fragile cessation of hostilities be transformed into a structured, credible, and sustainable pathway toward lasting peace?

The panel brought together distinguished experts and practitioners, including Dr. Gal Harmat (Swisspeace), Dr. Rula Hardal (A Land For All), Ambassador Deike Potzel (European Union Delegation to the United Nations in Geneva), Prof. Davide Rodogno (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies), and Matthias Schraner (Schraner Negotiation Institute).

A Fragile Pause: Risks and Immediate Opportunities

Speakers agreed that the October 2025 ceasefire created a critical, yet narrow, window of opportunity. The reduction of large-scale violence allowed for increased humanitarian access and opened political space for renewed engagement.

Humanitarian relief emerged as the most urgent opportunity. The halt to major hostilities and partial withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza’s main urban areas enabled greater aid delivery.

The agreement’s provisions regarding the release of Israeli hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners addressed one of the most emotionally charged dimensions of the conflict. This exchange reduced a significant trigger for renewed escalation and offered an opening for de-escalatory momentum.

Beyond immediate relief, the ceasefire created political space for discussion of reconstruction, governance, and longer-term arrangements.

At the same time, speakers stressed that ceasefires are inherently fragile instruments. Reports of alleged violations and continued low-level hostilities illustrate that the ceasefire functions more as a reduction of major combat than as a fully institutionalized enforcement regime. Several structural risks were highlighted, such as: the absence of a clear and unified Palestinian political leadership framework capable of steering the post-ceasefire process; the risk of insufficient Palestinian representation in shaping the political horizon; the danger of externally imposed frameworks lacking local legitimacy.

A recurring theme was that sustainable peace cannot be externally engineered. While international actors may facilitate, monitor, and incentivize compliance, ownership must remain with Palestinians and Israelis themselves.

The Role of International Actors

Participants also explored how current international dynamics may either facilitate or obstruct progress. Shifting regional alliances, global polarization, and evolving multilateral engagement all shape the environment in which negotiations unfold. A central question concerned the realistic role of international actors, including the European Union, the United States, and regional stakeholders such as Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. The discussion underscored that while external actors can provide guarantees, incentives, monitoring mechanisms, and diplomatic backing,

lasting solutions cannot be externally engineered. Sustainable peace requires ownership by the parties themselves, with international actors acting as facilitators rather than architects of imposed outcomes.

The Role of Diplomacy

In this context, the panel reflected on the role of diplomacy itself, referencing recent remarks at the Munich Security Conference questioning whether, in a “perfect world”, diplomats alone can resolve such conflicts. This prompted a deeper exchange: if the traditional diplomatic toolbox is insufficient, what must be re-imagined? Should diplomats simply continue operating within existing paradigms, or is there a need to rethink formats, actors, and frameworks of engagement?



Daring to Imagine

The discussion emphasized the importance of political imagination. Moving from ceasefire to peace demands more than technical negotiation; it requires the courage to challenge entrenched paradigms and to explore creative institutional and governance models capable of accommodating complexity rather than suppressing it.

Political imagination, combined with sustained engagement and carefully designed transitional steps, was identified as essential to transforming a fragile pause in violence into a credible political horizon.

In this context, particular emphasis was placed on the need for a bottom-up national dialogue. Peace cannot be constructed solely through exchanges among political and military decision-makers; it must also create meaningful platforms for engagement at the societal level. Facilitating encounters between communities, civil society actors, and ordinary citizens from both sides was described as crucial to rebuilding trust and preventing the re-entrenchment of polarized narratives. Such inclusive dialogue helps resist the dehumanization of the “other” and fosters the recognition of shared vulnerabilities and aspirations. Without this societal dimension, even the most carefully crafted political agreements risk remaining fragile and disconnected from the lived realities they seek to transform.



Beyond the Ceasefire: From Transactional Steps to Political Vision

The panel explored whether a “transactional peace”, based on immediate exchanges of interests, can

serve as a stepping stone toward a broader political settlement. While transactional arrangements may appear limited, they can generate momentum if embedded within a larger political imagination.

A key insight concerned negotiation strategy at three interconnected levels: At the table (formal negotiations); Around the table (stakeholders, spoilers, and constituencies); Beyond the table (public narratives and long-term legitimacy).

Speakers emphasized the importance of defining the “end game” from the outset. Reverse-engineering from a credible final vision may help align incremental steps with long-term objectives.

Rethinking the Two-State Framework

One participant illustrated the complexity of the two-state debate with a simple yet striking image: a cat and a dog peacefully sleeping side by side.

The discussion revisited the two-state solution not as a static formula, but as a framework that must adapt to realities on the ground. The traditional model of strict territorial separation does not fully reflect the deeply intertwined demographic and geographic realities between Israelis and Palestinians.

This opened the door to considering more innovative approaches, including confederative models, two self-determined political entities operating

within a cooperative and interconnected structure. The idea of “one homeland, two political entities” was discussed as a possible way to reconcile self-determination with interdependence.

Like the cat and the dog, the challenge is not necessarily to live apart, but to learn how to coexist within shared space, with rules, guarantees, and mutual recognition.

Learning from Other Peace Processes

The panel reflected on lessons from other protracted conflicts where ceasefires evolved into more durable arrangements:

- The IRA ceasefire and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland.
- The Colombian government–FARC ceasefire (2012), which paved the way for the 2016 peace agreement.
- The 1992 Rome General Peace Accords in Mozambique, combining ceasefire, demobilization, political inclusion, and reintegration.

Across these cases, several recurring patterns emerged. Ceasefires were not treated as standalone arrangements but were explicitly anchored in a broader political roadmap. Third-party mediation and monitoring mechanisms remained actively engaged well beyond the initial announcement of the truce, providing continuity and oversight. The political inclusion of former adversaries proved

essential to long-term durability. Participants emphasized that mediators must remain present to manage violations, prevent escalation, and address misunderstandings, rather than withdrawing once a ceasefire is declared.



What Is the Goal: Stability or Peace?

An important part of our discussion focused on how the objective of a negotiation should be formulated.

One of our speakers claimed that, rather than labelling a negotiation outcome as “peace,” it may be more strategic to use terminology that raises fewer immediate expectations.

The term “stability” offers such an alternative. A solution can be considered stable if it does not easily tip out of balance, changes only gradually, and withstands external pressures. Stability emphasizes durability and resilience rather than symbolic finality. Similarly, “de-escalation” is a term that is clear and operational while generating more measured expectations. This raises a strategic question: should negotiations aim for the realism of stability or the aspirational power of peace?

During the discussion, two positions emerged. One view argued that “stability” should be formulated as the immediate goal, as the term “peace” risks creating expectations that are too ambitious and potentially unattainable in the short term. The counter-argument maintained that “peace” must remain the declared objective: if the goal is framed too modestly, actors may lack the motivation and political will to fully commit. As one speaker put it, “peace is sexy”: it mobilizes support, imagination, and long-term commitment.

A participant from the audience raised a provocative question: Can we dream about stability?

The question captured the underlying tension of the debate. “Peace” carries emotional weight. It evokes reconciliation, justice, and a transformed future. It mobilizes imagination and political will. Stability, by contrast, may sound technical, managerial, even uninspiring.

It speaks to balance, containment, and endurance rather than transformation. Yet the question invites deeper reflection. While stability may not ignite collective imagination in the same way peace does, it can represent something profoundly meaningful in contexts of prolonged violence: predictability instead of chaos, safety instead of fear, institutions that function instead of collapse. For populations living through conflict, stability may not be a modest dream at all, it may be an urgent and deeply human aspiration.

The exchange ultimately revealed that the debate is not only semantic but psychological and political: how goals are framed shapes expectations, commitment, and the perceived legitimacy of the process itself.



The Debate on Past Grievances and Future Negotiations

One of the most vivid exchanges concerned whether negotiators should separate past grievances from present and future goals. Some argued that serious negotiations cannot ignore historical trauma, injustice, and identity. Others maintained that an excessive focus on the past risks political paralysis and that future-oriented pragmatism is essential. The discussion suggested that durable peace processes must acknowledge dual narratives without allowing them to immobilize forward movement.



Key Takeaway

1. A ceasefire creates opportunity, but opportunity alone does not guarantee transformation.

2. To move from a fragile pause in violence to lasting peace, stakeholders must:

- Link security stabilization to a credible political roadmap.
- Ensure meaningful and inclusive representation.
- Anchor international engagement in facilitation rather than imposition.
- Combine pragmatic negotiation steps with political imagination.
- Define a clear end vision and align incremental actions accordingly.

Despite profound mistrust and the weight of atrocities, the panel concluded that sustained negotiation and political engagement remain indispensable. Without them, ceasefires risk becoming temporary interruptions in recurring cycles of violence. With them, even fragile pauses may evolve into pathways toward sustainable peace.



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